

**Statement of Rep. James A. Leach**  
**Chairman, Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific**  
**Hearing on “The Human Rights Dialogue With Vietnam:**  
**Is Vietnam Making Significant Progress?”**  
*March 29, 2006*

I would like to thank Chairman Smith for taking the initiative in convening this joint hearing on human rights dialogue with the Government of Vietnam. I look forward to receiving testimony from the impressive roster of officials, organizations, and individuals before us today.

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is a nation undergoing dramatic changes. Most apparent has been the transition of its centrally-planned economy toward a more market-based system. This has in turn unleashed the entrepreneurial genius of the Vietnamese people, with social and political ramifications that will become fully clear only in the years ahead.

The past decade also has brought a warming of relations between our two countries. In an irony of history, Vietnam is now one of the most solicitous advocates of increased U.S. involvement in the Asia Pacific region, notwithstanding our bitter conflict three decades ago. Growing numbers of Vietnamese Americans are renewing personal, familial, and commercial ties with their ancestral homeland. Vietnam is the site for Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meetings this year and will host President Bush at the APEC Leaders Meeting in November. One small but appreciated indicator of our rising bilateral ties was the extended visit of Vietnamese Ambassador Nguyen Tam Chien to my home district in Iowa last week. Increased contacts between our peoples and our governments will pay important dividends in mutual understanding.

At the same time, as was reported earlier this month by the Department of State, the human rights record of the Government of Vietnam remains marked by serious deficiencies. Political dissidents, certain unregistered religious communities, and marginalized populations in the Northwestern and Central Highlands continue to face significant suppression. On the other hand, this year's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices note some improvements, such as large-scale prisoner amnesties, and the promulgation of implementing regulations for a more relaxed ordinance on belief and

religion. It is my hope that our witnesses today can help to clarify the relative significance of these and other developments.

Human rights dialogue is an important component of mature relations between states, and a signal concern of the American people. It is natural that Vietnamese human rights issues will receive increased attention as the Administration considers whether to extend Vietnam's designation as a Country of Particular Concern for violations of religious freedom, and as the Congress considers approving Permanent Normal Trade Relations for Vietnam, in connection with Vietnam's attempt to join the World Trade Organization this year.

The general legal framework for protecting human rights is clearly improving in Vietnam, but enforcement of more tolerant approaches to minority faiths and views is not yet as comprehensive. The better big picture cannot be considered sufficient if specific exceptions to otherwise positive trends continue. Nonetheless, while candor requires attention to individual problems, it also requires recognition of the improvements that are so clearly taking place.

2006 could thus be a seminal year in U.S.-Vietnamese relations. In the context of the past being prologue, what is most impressive at this moment is that our two countries which were embroiled in conflict three decades ago are finding common grounds for mutual accommodation. Hopefully, this new relationship will strengthen to the advantage of all.

In conclusion, let me stress that there is unanimity on this side of the Pacific that human rights problems continue in Vietnam, but that the trajectory is one of improvement. The question thus becomes how Congress and the Executive branch respond. We can emphasize areas of continued disagreement, or we can move to engage as forthcomingly as possible. I favor the latter; we should move positively and quickly, Congress and the Executive together. Vietnam has a problematic governmental structure, but a wondrous people. It is the people and their best interests that we should emphasize in decision-making today.

Thank you.

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